

Humanitarian principles and organisational culture: everyday practice in Médecins Sans Frontières-Holland

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Introduction

Until recently, it would have been nonsensical, or at least counter-intuitive, to write a paper on humanitarian principles for a publication devoted to learning organisations. Principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality were considered universal, not evolving or contextual. These principles were thought to be enshrined in international humanitarian law and embodied in the practices of the Red Cross movement. But in the last decade, this has changed dramatically. Changes in the nature of conflict, the complex contexts in which humanitarian work is undertaken, and the proliferation of humanitarian organisations have contributed to a situation in which humanitarian principles are being debated and negotiated. One of the signalling events that set these changes in motion was the formation of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in 1971. This offshoot of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) came about in response to experiences during the war in Biafra. It was a deliberate challenge to the perceived rigidity of some of the principles and hierarchical workstyle of the ICRC. The founders of MSF considered *témoignage* (the witnessing and shaming of humanitarian law abuses) an important complement to providing relief, but nonetheless compatible with the principles of impartiality and neutrality. MSF also stands for a different workstyle. By employing volunteers for humanitarian work, the organisation provides people who are motivated by the humanitarian spirit with the opportunity to contribute to worthwhile action, and it thus maintains a strong embeddedness in society.

While in the last few years there have been a number of conferences and publications on humanitarian principles in response to changing political contexts, this paper focuses on the meaning of principles for humanitarian workers in their everyday practice. Principles are

declared and are formally negotiated in codes of conduct and in working arrangements between the parties involved in situations of complex crisis. However, what difference these make in practice depends on how they are translated by the people who put them to use. How they are implemented in the running of a field hospital or in responding to numerous small events encountered in providing assistance depends on staff members' interpretation of the situation and the principles. To understand how principles work in practice, it is therefore important to take into account that these operate through patterns of organisational culture.

Principles do not only work in regulating actions and relations with external stakeholders of humanitarian organisations, they also have a bearing upon organisational life and motivation. It was this latter aspect in particular that triggered the research informing this paper, which examines the way organisational principles are experienced by MSF volunteers in the field, and how this influences their decision to stay with or leave the organisation.¹ This question was identified by the MSF management who wanted to find out the extent to which MSF's specific principles make a difference for the people working for the organisation. The core of the research consisted of in-depth interviews with 14 volunteers who had just returned after one to three missions lasting anywhere between six months and two years. Half of the interviewees were medical personnel and the others were logistics experts.

The first part of this paper introduces humanitarian principles and the recent discussions that have evolved around them, followed by some theoretical notes on the meaning of principles in organisational practice and culture. Everyday field experience will be illustrated by a fictional account of a day in the life of a volunteer, which was constructed on the basis of interview material. We then elaborate how volunteers redefine and renegotiate principles in practice. As we shall argue, the implementation of principles in humanitarian action is patterned by organisational culture where all actors use their own agency to learn, redefine, and negotiate what happens.

Humanitarian principles

Humanitarian action finds its essential motivation in the principle of humanity, defined by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) as 'the desire to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found ... to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being' (IFRC 2001). Humanitarian action

addresses human suffering, whether resulting from disasters caused by natural hazards or by situations of conflict. Humanitarian principles that guide assistance, such as the principles of impartiality and neutrality, find their rationale in international humanitarian law and stem specifically from experiences in war situations. Henry Dunant initiated the formal regulation of warfare after the Battle of Solferino in 1859. Wars in those days were typically between competing nation-state armies, and the idea of reducing suffering was appealing as a means of legitimising warfare in increasingly democratising societies. Humanitarianism started with the Geneva Convention of 1864 and the recognition of the ICRC, which was given space to operate on the condition of neutrality and impartiality (Leader 2000:12). After the massive abuse of humanitarian ideals in the Second World War, four more Geneva Conventions elaborated the rules of war. It is important to note that the term 'humanitarian principles' refers to moral principles to mitigate the destructive impact of war, but it is also used to refer to principles of humanitarian action. This paper is concerned with the latter. Principles of humanitarian action are *derived* from international humanitarian law but are not *integral* to the conventions that regulate warfare among belligerents (Leader 1998).

In the last two decades, humanitarian principles have generated extensive debate and undergone much change. This development is related to several factors. First, the nature of conflict has increasingly moved away from the wars between nations that inspired international humanitarian law. Today's conflicts are mostly intra-state in nature. They occur in societies where the legitimacy and representational capacity of the State is low or even non-existent, at least in the eyes of certain sectors of society. Civilians are often the direct targets of violence and account for 90 per cent of all victims. Warfare is spread over a large area and fragmented in nature. In the 'battlefield', use is made of light weaponry and small arms, while common techniques include methods such as rape, 'ethnic cleansing', and starvation, which are specifically directed against the civilian population. International conventions and rules for warfare in these cases hardly apply, and humanitarian organisations have had likewise to reconsider their working principles. In particular, the principle of neutrality has come to be renegotiated in humanitarian politics, varying across both situations and organisations. Leader (2000) identifies three different positions in this respect: 'neutrality elevated', 'neutrality abandoned', and 'third-way humanitarianism' seeking a middle way.

Second, there has been a proliferation of organisations which are active in humanitarian operations. Even when they nominally embrace the same principles, the way these principles are translated into practice may differ substantially. Among others, organisations have different positions in the status they accord to principles, varying between the view that they are universal and imperative (people have the universal right to humanitarian assistance) to the view that they are relative (Macrae 1996:34). These different meanings come to the surface and clash when organisations want to define a coordinated response to a particular crisis, as for instance in South Sudan and Liberia (Atkinson and Leader 2000; Bradbury *et al.* 2000). Third, humanitarian principles have been further elaborated, thus creating more potential for diversity. On the basis of a survey among humanitarian organisations, Minear and Weiss (1993) found that eight principles were included by most agencies in the package of humanitarian principles. Apart from the so-called classic principles, humanitarian organisations, partly affected by notions from development but mainly learning from their own experiences, had come to adopt a new generation of principles including accountability and the need for appropriateness and contextualisation. Fourth, humanitarian organisations to different degrees have taken on additional, but not always equally compatible, sets of principles, such as human rights, justice (directed at fair and equal relationships), development and peace building, and staff protection. Finally, humanitarian principles have come to be debated as a result of increasing doubts about the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian aid. Some consider humanitarian action liable to be part of the problem rather than the solution by actually feeding into the economies of war, acting as diversion for political solutions, or undermining people's coping and livelihood capacities (see, for instance, Anderson 1996; Prendergast 1996; de Waal 1997).

Changing political and military contexts of conflict and the proliferation of organisations and principles have all contributed to revealing the negotiated nature of principles. Humanitarian principles have lost their universality and their aura as radiant beacons in the storms of humanitarian crises. This has led to what some have labelled an ethical crisis in humanitarianism. We do not wish to add to this debate on ethics, but would rather approach the problem in a more empirical way. Having realised that principles are relative rather than absolute, one then has to ask: What do principles *do* for organisations? What constitutes the relation between principles and practice? Are humanitarians simply drifting around? How can humanitarian workers

distinguish right from wrong in the minutiae of their everyday work? These questions direct attention to the importance of organisational culture for understanding humanitarian work in practice.

Organisational principles and culture

Principles, in classic organisational thinking, precede policy, which in turn precedes implementation. Principles, in this view, are defined or declared by the founders or trustees of an organisation; management translates them into policies; and staff deal with their implementation. Recent thinking about organisations, on the other hand, views principles and policy as processes rather than entities. Colebatch (1998:111), for instance, sees policy and principles as ‘continuing patterns of events and understanding’. Indeed, as the above discussion illustrates, principles find expression in historically specific ways and evolve in response to organisational experience. The relation between principle and practice ceases to be sequential and becomes mutually informing: principles shape practice but at the same time only become alive through everyday practice where they are interpreted and reshaped. The translation of principles into practice is not the prerogative of management but happens through the combined actions of *all* staff members and other involved actors. It is, therefore, not enough to follow formal declarations of principles and policy. Rather to understand the working of principles we must look at the actions of fieldworkers (Long 1989).

The processes by which principles are assessed in order to identify which are the more appropriate ones for a given situation and then applying them are not rational. How actors understand principles and the situations in which they apply is mediated by their institutional experiences, expectations, and ‘lifeworld’. (The concept of lifeworld denotes the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life.) The interpretation of principles is, furthermore, a social process: it is through interaction that individuals make sense of principles and practice. Much of this happens implicitly and routinely: in the course of time, patterns evolve from which fieldworkers derive their decisions. These can be called patterns of organisational culture.

Such cultural patterns evolve in the first place in the field teams of humanitarian organisations. MSF volunteers on mission experience conditions that are very different from ‘normal’ work situations. The volunteers have to make sense of a new environment, in tense security

situations, where they face unprecedented experiences that often take place in the context of, or have, emotional impact. Family and friends are left behind and life on mission is so extraordinary that volunteers often think that people at home cannot relate to them. In the field there is hardly any space or time separating work from non-work. The team frequently forms the volunteers' only social network: they do not go home and cannot reflect on their work with outsiders. This situation has a strong resemblance to what Erving Goffman (1961) called 'closed communities'. Much importance is attached to a local team that largely coincides with the lifeworld of volunteers at that moment. Social interaction with immediate colleagues becomes a major reference point for making sense of the situation and of experiences at work.

Similar patterns may be identified in a broader context, whether MSF-wide or across the humanitarian sector. This sector is characterised by a rapid staff turnover. Knowledge and experience thus travel around within it and result to some extent in shared patterns of practice. However, culture too is a process. Organisational culture is not a piece of luggage that humanitarian workers carry around with them. Evolving patterns are never final: they change in response to situations. Besides, there are always competing patterns and alternative actions. Implicitly or explicitly, fieldworkers use their agency to select and apply certain courses of action over others. Yet, while such cultural patterns are not totally voluntary, they do serve to order organisational life wherein ideas become institutionalised and practices take on habitual or ritual properties (Hilhorst forthcoming).

Once we acknowledge that every staff member contributes to the shaping of organisational principles through everyday practice, it becomes clear that the set of principles that an organisation adopts may change considerably in the experience of its staff. As we shall argue below, MSF volunteers not only reinterpret principles, but also adhere to other ordering principles they deem typical for MSF and more determinant of their life in the field. Likewise, staff members find their own channels for negotiating principles outside formal communications, for instance through informal interaction and 'gossip'.

Although organisational principles are renegotiated in practice, they remain important for the organisation. They may not dictate practice, but do help to order humanitarian action in many, perhaps unexpected, ways. They serve as anchor points expressing what an organisation wants to achieve and on what values its actions are based. Besides

having the potential to prescribe action, they provide fieldworkers with clues about how to accord meaning to their interactions, the environment, and the events around them. In addition, principles are identity markers that help organisations to distinguish themselves from others working in the same field (Rokebach 1973:159). Furthermore, principles can serve to boost motivation. People want to give meaning to their actions and make sense of their interactions with others. Principles can thus add some higher meaning to otherwise tedious or tense work (Sims *et al.* 1993:269). Finally, principles can work as 'glue' when they bind members of an organisation together (Barnard and Walker 1994:57). Principles thus remain important in different ways. How they work in practice depends on how actors understand and employ them in the field. Therefore we stress the need for an ethnographic approach to the study of principles.

MSF-Holland

MSF was founded in 1971 and MSF-Holland (MSF-H) followed in 1984. MSF has five operational centres in Europe and 13 support offices. Canada, the UK, and Germany function as partner sections of MSF-H. MSF-H supervises about 34 missions (in 30 countries), is responsible for sending out almost 800 people each year, and has about 2800 local staff members. In the countries in which MSF-H has projects, country managers and their teams are responsible for setting up and establishing the aims and functioning of the projects. Each project has a coordinator who is responsible for the team and reports to the country coordinator, who in turn reports to the operational manager at headquarters. With 700,000 contributors and an annual turnover of around DFL150 million (US\$67 million), MSF-H has become one of the best-known humanitarian aid organisations in the world.

The set of principles defined by MSF, as in other organisations, is a mix of old- and new-generation humanitarian principles (MSF 1996, 1999a). MSF embraces *impartiality*, *independence*, and *neutrality*. Through direct contact with the victims of crisis, MSF expresses its compassion and guarantees *proximity*. *Transparency* and *accountability* stand for the belief that all information should be available to everyone inside and outside the organisation.

What makes MSF distinct from other organisations are the principles of *advocacy*, *voluntarism*, and *association*. Being neutral does not forbid MSF-H to speak out about abuses of international humanitarian law witnessed in the field. Advocacy for MSF-H implies

drawing attention whenever possible to abuses of humanitarian law, either through silent diplomacy or with the help of the media (MSF 1998). MSF-H director Austen Davis explained this (when addressing an introductory course for volunteers in 1999) as a 'moral duty to speak out' and is the point distinguishing MSF from other organisations. MSF is committed to the principles of voluntarism and association to fulfil a social mission (MSF 1999a). The organisation is an association based on volunteer members, who make up part of the mission teams.

Principles, for MSF, are clearly not universal. A 1999 policy document states that there is a challenge in principled action:

These principles are there to help us debate and structure relevant and meaningful action – but should never serve as barriers, hindering our direct action. These values and principles are still relevant and alive and they must be nurtured and sustained and lived through – with all the compromises inherent in human social life.

(MSF 1999b)

This also means that MSF emphasises the need to learn and to change its principles when appropriate. MSF-H states in its *Medium-term Policy Document* (1999a,b) that the organisation 'must constantly seek to bring in new members to bring in new ideas and question old wisdom, principles and policies'.

Although principles are not seen as universal, they are nonetheless regarded as important, and are emphasised during the Preparation Primary Departure (PPD) course for volunteers. This course lasts between one and two weeks and introduces volunteers to the MSF philosophy as much as to the everyday life of a mission.

Anna's day

To illustrate the daily work of one MSF volunteer, let us describe a day from Anna's life in the field. Anna (a pseudonym) is a 30-year-old Dutch nurse who has been on a six-month mission in Africa. Anna's day is a compilation from excerpts of the interview we had with her.

Anna knows when she wakes up that another hectic day lies ahead of her. Although the real emergency is over, and the vaccination campaign has become routine, it is still a lot of work. The other members of the team are out there already. When she goes to the toilet somebody knocks on the door and asks her where she had put a particular medicine the day before. The day starts. Still sleepy, she gets a cup of coffee. But there is no way to drink it in peace. Local staff are running around, getting to work, looking for papers

and medicine while she tries to have breakfast. The first patients are already waiting outside. After having been here for three months, her wish for some privacy should have disappeared and she should know better. Instead, she gets bad tempered and wants to go back to bed. The fact that she has had maybe three hours to herself in the last three months does not help. And the doctor, who came some three weeks ago for a short mission, is already working, waiting eagerly for her to start as well. She leaves her coffee and starts the daily work.

First, she works alongside the newly arrived doctor. She has noticed that this doctor does not want to listen to anything about how his predecessors did the job; he wants to do it his own way and to find things out by himself. For Anna this is an inefficient 'learning-by-doing' approach that fails to take into consideration the experiences of others. With the high staff turnover in this emergency project, knowledge just slips away. After a while, Anna leaves the doctor as she has to get in touch with colleagues in the capital. She asks another nurse to take over, ignoring her resentment, as this woman does not get along with the doctor. While Anna observes this, she finds it again remarkable that personal matters are so important in the team and that they cannot put these to one side and just get on with the work. Despite having problems with each other, she knows that the doctor and nurse will start now to talk about her. Gossip is the most common thing in this project.

Anna goes to the office and contacts the capital. While waiting for the telephone to work, she looks out of the window and sees some of her expatriate colleagues talking with the local staff. From this distance she can see the discomfort of the local staff caused by the nonchalant behaviour of the expats, who have obviously not been around long enough to become sensitive to the local culture. Thinking about the last few months, Anna realises that morale in the project has gone down. It seems that the problems never bothered them in the beginning. Then they were all on an adrenaline 'high', and everybody had the same goal and knew what to do. But now it is a matter of maintaining the project, which involves more routine work. This seems much harder for the volunteers to deal with than an emergency.

The Country Manager calls again and tells Anna that she will come after work to meet with the team to discuss the importance of MSF principles. Anna sits back and thinks that it is good to talk about principles once in a while. Their team is losing perspective regarding MSF. Although the local staff always remind her of this identity by calling her 'Sister Anna from MSF', she feels increasingly distant from the values and policies of the organisation. When she had just completed her PPD course she felt strongly

connected to the principles MSF stands for. She knows these matter, but here in the field the staff are just busy with work and team problems.

When she leaves the office to announce that evening's meeting, she sees another volunteer arrive unexpectedly. This volunteer works in another project but was with Anna in the emergency phase of the same project. She helped Anna a lot in her first weeks, when there were no other experienced people around. They are happy to see each other and Anna wants to chat immediately with her about her experiences and the dilemmas she faces. But of course, there is no time. Finally, after work and before the Country Manager arrives, Anna and her friend can have a beer together. Anna always knew that MSF people work hard and in a close team, but she had not anticipated the almost total lack of privacy. For lack of any alternative, Anna and her friend lock themselves in the toilet to have their beer and chat. Here Anna tells her friend how difficult it was a few days ago, when a female genital circumcision had taken place in a nearby village. Local people had carried it out under terribly unhygienic circumstances. MSF has a strict 'hands off' policy on this matter. It is opposed to the practice and does not want to contribute in any way to the procedure. Anna tells her how bad she had felt and that she had given the woman clean tools to make the operation less dangerous. Now, some days later, she still feels bothered, as she basically agrees with the MSF policy. But after all she has her medical ethics too. Talking about it helps to make Anna feel better. There is much more to discuss, but after a while they have to vacate the toilet.

Unfortunately, the discussion with the Country Manager about organisational principles turns out to be perfunctory. After a 12-hour working day, the team members are not interested and want to go to bed. Besides, the topic is remote to their experiences, as there is no space to discuss team issues. Sometimes, Anna no longer knows why she is so committed to MSF and her work. Often she feels she gives a lot and gets little in return from the organisation, although she feels very rewarded by the responses of the local people. Nonetheless, she wants to give it another try. Her loyalty to MSF is high and even though she does not always see them put into practice, she agrees with MSF's values and principles.

Principles in everyday practice

Anna's account strikingly underlines the closed character of mission teams that come to occupy to a large extent the lifeworld of those belonging to them. A lack of privacy, extensive gossiping, and small irritations seem to dominate especially, as Anna explains, when an

acute emergency is over and the operation starts to be more dictated by routine. Other interviewees also pointed to the relatively mundane nature of their experiences in comparison to the principled mission they had hoped to join. As one said, 'We never talked about principles or ideology, the conversations were always about things like getting stuck in the mud and the latest local plane crash.' A first comment about principles, then, is that in terms of their importance in discussions about humanitarian assistance, they may fade away in the routines of everyday experience of humanitarian work.

When asked how principles ordered their action, it was remarkable that volunteers more often referred to what may be termed organisational ordering principles than to the humanitarian values normally associated with the notion of principles. On the basis of the interviews, four such ordering principles were identified: an unbureaucratic attitude, a focus on emergency relief, democracy, and ownership. Democracy applies to the notion that each person has a voice in the organisation, and ownership implies that 'we are all a big family'. Here, we shall elaborate the two most frequently cited, namely the unbureaucratic attitude and the focus on emergency relief. They are both thought to distinguish MSF from other organisations in a positive way, while also having their more negative sides.

The 'unbureaucratic' attitude is considered to typify MSF's culture. Characteristics such as responsibility, freedom, and flexibility have a major and positive impact on volunteers: 'I liked the horizontal organisation, that fitted me'; 'unbureaucratic and independent, that is what attracted me'; 'with MSF I could do what I felt was right, with another organisation that would have been impossible'; 'we are special: there is a kind of dynamic atmosphere that I don't see in other organisations. While the others spend time writing reports we are out there, thinking what else we can do.' On the other hand, the positive image of an unbureaucratic organisation can be overtaken by negative experiences. The borderline between a highly appreciated lack of bureaucracy and a criticised lack of professionalism appears to be thin. Some volunteers complained about managers or colleagues abusing their discretion or being unable to live up to their obligations. Some were also frustrated by a lack of clarity about tasks and responsibilities.

The focus on emergency work very much shapes the image of MSF and the everyday practices of fieldworkers. Would-be volunteers are most attracted by the idea of relieving distress when they join the organisation. In practice, this may lead to several problems. First, as

Anna made clear, volunteers may be disappointed to find that they will not be working in an immediate emergency. One interviewee also noted that the expatriate staff were bored by daily routines: 'They wanted action and [to] move fast.' In fact, however, only about a third of all MSF projects relate to immediate emergencies. Second, interviewees note the work style and pressure associated with this principle. They feel that MSF staff display an emergency work style even in non-emergency situations, and there is strong peer pressure to work long hours and to ignore local holidays. As one individual put it: 'It is so hard to stop working when others in the team continue. They keep asking questions and you just don't feel good when you don't work.'

These aspects of MSF are important. They are considered more 'typically MSF' than, for instance, the emphasis on advocacy. They also make a difference to the well-being of volunteers. When these aspects work well they add to the motivation, but they can also be a liability when they result in unrealistic expectations or when shortcomings inherent in these principles become apparent. Finally, they make a difference for the character and effectiveness of the humanitarian operation. The way in which staff perceive and organise their work affects their relations with other stakeholders, the quality of services delivered, their accountability, and the level of beneficiary participation they achieve. In short, they have a direct bearing on the quality and impact of humanitarian assistance.

What about the classic humanitarian principles such as neutrality and impartiality? From the interviews, it appears that when volunteers encounter dilemmas or are faced with making decisions, they have different ways of dealing with principles. They usually treat them, in line with MSF's view, as helpful guidelines that can be adapted according to the situation in question. There are two ways in which volunteers circumvent policies and principles when they consider these inappropriate. First, they refer to the pragmatic requirements of the situation: 'We knew we had no mandate to negotiate with the military, but we did it every day, how else could we have done our job?' '... I was not allowed to give rides, but I always gave the customs officer a lift to the airport because I needed this man to get the cargo through customs'.

In making these kinds of everyday decisions, volunteers often put the need to get their job done ahead of the policies. The other way in which volunteers negotiate principles is by justifying their actions by referring to higher or parallel principles. When Anna breaches the hands-off policy on circumcision, she defends this by invoking her medical ethics.

In one case, an interviewee explained how the team found ways to extend assistance to the local population even though this was against the organisation's policy, which stipulated that only the refugees should be given aid. Since the volunteers considered this policy against the (higher) principle of neutrality, they circumvented it in practice.

MSF policy, as we explained above, incorporates a processual and iterative notion of organisational principles. It encourages the idea that principles be debated in their context. The organisation is also aware of the importance of dynamics in field teams, and several measures are built into the operations to deal with such dynamics. Normally, more experienced fieldworkers guide new volunteers and there is room to evaluate and discuss issues related to the team. The loneliness and sense of isolation that Anna experienced may thus be more the exception than the rule in the organisation.

The purpose of this paper is not to determine whether or not MSF lives up to its principles, but to use the case of MSF to illustrate the importance of taking into account everyday practice and patterns of organisational culture when discussing humanitarian principles. According to feedback from MSF management on our research, our findings resonate well with the experience in the organisation that continuously endeavours to be a reflective and learning organisation. Our concern is whether the knowledge of the importance of everyday practice for the working of humanitarian principles, as corroborated by experienced humanitarian workers, is sufficiently taken into account in discussions and initiatives regarding these principles.

Conclusion

Humanitarian assistance is not very conducive to standardised practice owing to its emergency character and the volatile political context in which it is given. Short-term projects and rapid staff turnover further limit processes of organisational learning. As developments over recent decades have made clear, these problems cannot be remedied by declaring ever-expanding sets of principles to dictate practice. MSF and other agencies, well aware of the dilemmas faced in offering humanitarian assistance, have taken this into account and invested in expanding their organisational learning capacities. There has been a marked increase in human resource development programmes and attention to monitoring and evaluation.

Interestingly, the very same speed of operations and staff turnover that hinder organisational learning also facilitate institutional learning,

if this is understood to mean learning *across* the humanitarian sector (Brabant 1997). A number of experienced individuals have worked in and obtained an overview of a large range of crises and humanitarian organisations. They have developed social networks of humanitarian workers across agencies in which they exchange experience and ideas. Thanks to these humanitarian troubadours, one might say that an imagined humanitarian community (see Anderson 1993) is evolving in which humanitarians learn from each other and start to develop common agendas for change, despite differences that continue to exist between agencies.

In the last five years, this has resulted in a number of initiatives taken by changing alliances of humanitarian organisations that all, one way or another, aim to enhance the quality and the learning capacity of humanitarian organisations (Hilhorst 2001). Worthy of mention here are the development of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief; the Active Learning Network of Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Assistance Programmes (ALNAP), which focuses on the improvement of evaluation and learning; the Ombudsman Project and, more recently, the Humanitarian Accountability Project, which deal with accountability to beneficiaries; the Sphere project, which has developed standards for humanitarian aid; the People in Aid programme to enhance human resource policies in organisations; and the Humanitarian Quality Platform, which brings together a number of French and international humanitarian NGOs.

Taken together, these projects represent an enormous capacity to learn and improve humanitarian assistance programmes, provided they become part of humanitarian organisations in practice. What this paper argues is the importance of grounding these initiatives in analyses of the everyday practice of humanitarian programmes and especially of involving the stories of the fieldworkers who are responsible for their implementation. New policies and standards should reflect the experiences of these frontline workers and be relevant to their practice. Without knowing how ordinary staff members translate and negotiate principles in their everyday practice, discussions regarding principles tend to become abstract. Without taking into account informal learning mechanisms (both positive and negative) that evolve among staff members who actively try to make sense of their actions and the programmes in which they work, it will be difficult to close the gaps between thinking and implementation.

Note

- 1 This research was undertaken by Nadja Schmiemann and supervised by Thea Hillhorst and Georg Frerks of the Department of Disaster Studies at Wageningen University, and Austen Davis and Paul van het Wout of MSF-H. It resulted in an MSc thesis (Schmiemann 2000). We thank Davis and Frerks for their comments on the paper and Laura Roper for her encouragement.

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